

George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)

5 *Oscar of Alva*

How sweetly shines through azure skies,
The lamp of heaven on Lora's shore;
Where Alva's hoary turrets rise,
And hear the din of arms no more.

But often has yon rolling moon 5
On Alva's casques of silver play'd;
And view'd, at midnight's silent noon,
Her chiefs in gleaming mail array'd:

And on the crimson'd rocks beneath,
Which scowl o'er ocean's sullen flow 10
Pale in the scatter'd ranks of death,
She saw the gasping warrior low;

While many an eye which ne'er again
Could mark the rising orb of day,
Turn'd feebly from the gory plain, 15
Beheld in death her fading ray.

Once to those eyes the lamp of Love,
They blest her dear propitious light;
But now she glimmer'd from above,
A sad, funereal torch of night. 20

Faded is Alva's noble race,
And gray her towers are seen afar;
No more her heroes urge the chase,
Or roll the crimson tide of war.

But who was last of Alva's clan? 25
Why grows the moss on Alva's stone?
Her towers resound no steps of man,
They echo to the gale alone.

And when that gale is fierce and high,
A sound is heard in yonder hall; 30
It rises hoarsely through the sky,
And vibrates o'er the mouldering wall.

Yes, when the eddying tempest sighs,
It shakes the shield of Oscar brave;
But there no more his banners rise, 35
No more his plumes of sable wave.

Fair shone the sun on Oscar's birth,
When Angus hail'd his eldest born;
The vassals round their chieftain's hearth
Crowd to applaud the happy morn. 40

They feast upon the mountain deer,
The pibroch raised its piercing note:
To gladden more their highland cheer,
The strains in martial numbers float:

And they who heard the war-notes wild 45
Hoped that one day the pibroch's strain
Should play before the hero's child
While he should lead the tartan train.

Another year is quickly past,
And Angus hails another son; 50
His natal day is like the last,
Nor soon the jocund feast was done.

Taught by their sire to bend the bow,
On Alva's dusky hills of wind,
The boys in childhood chased the roe, 55
And left their hounds in speed behind.

But ere their years of youth are o'er,
They mingle in the ranks of war;
They lightly wheel the bright claymore,

And send the whistling arrow far. 60

Dark was the flow of Oscar's hair,
Wildly it stream'd along the gale;
But Allan's locks were bright and fair,
And pensive seem'd his cheek, and pale.

But Oscar own'd a hero's soul, 65
His dark eye shone through beams of truth;
Allan had early learn'd control,
And smooth his words had been from youth.

Both, both were brave: the Saxon spear
Was shiver'd oft beneath their steel; 70
And Oscar's bosom scorn'd to fear,
But Oscar's bosom knew to feel;

While Allan's soul belied his form,
Unworthy with such charms to dwell:
Keen as the lightning of the storm, 75
On foes his deadly vengeance fell.

From high Southannon's distant tower
Arrived a young and noble dame;
With Kenneth's lands to form her dower,
Glenalvon's blue-eyed daughter came; 80

And Oscar claim'd the beauteous bride,
And Angus on his Oscar smiled:
It soothed the father's feudal pride
Thus to obtain Glenalvon's child.

Hark to the pibroch's pleasing note! 85
Hark to the swelling nuptial song!
In joyous strains the voices float,
And still the choral peal prolong.

See how the heroes' blood-red plumes
Assembled wave in Alva's hall; 90

Each youth his varied plaid assumes,
Attending on their chieftain's call.

It is not war their aid demands,
The pibroch plays the song of peace;
To Oscar's nuptials throng the bands, 95
Nor yet the sounds of pleasure cease.

But where is Oscar? sure 't is late:
Is this a bridegroom's ardent flame?
While thronging guests and ladies wait,
Nor Oscar nor his brother came. 100

At length young Allan join'd the bride:
"Why comes not Oscar," Angus said:
"Is he not here?" the youth replied:
"With me he roved not o'er the glade:

"Perchance, forgetful of the day, 105
'T is his to chase the bounding roe;
Or ocean's waves prolong his stay;
Yet Oscar's bark is seldom slow."

"Oh, no!" the anguish'd sire rejoin'd,
"Nor chase nor wave my boy delay; 110
Would he to Mora seem unkind?
Would aught to her impede his way?"

"Oh, search, ye chiefs! oh, search around!
Allan, with these through Alva fly;
Till Oscar, till my son is found, 115
Haste, haste, nor dare attempt reply."

All is confusion — through the vale
The name of Oscar hoarsely rings,
It rises on the murmuring gale,
Till night expands her dusky wings; 120

It breaks the stillness of the night,

Days roll'd along, the orb of light
Again had run his destined race;
No Oscar bless'd his father's sight, 155
And sorrow left a fainter trace.

For youthful Allan still remain'd,
And now his father's only joy:
And Mora's heart was quickly gain'd,
For beauty crown'd the fair-hair'd boy. 160

She thought that Oscar low was laid,
And Allan's face was wondrous fair;
If Oscar lived, some other maid
Had claim'd his faithless bosom's care.

And Angus said, if one year more 165
In fruitless hope was pass'd away,
His fondest scruples should be o'er,
And he would name their nuptial day.

Slow roll'd the moons, but blest at last
Arrived the dearly destined morn; 170
The year of anxious trembling past,
What smiles the lovers' cheeks adorn!

Hark to the pibroch's pleasing note!
Hark to the swelling nuptial song!
In joyous strains the voices float, 175
And still the choral peal prolong.

Again the clan, in festive crowd,
Throng through the gate of Alva's hall;
The sounds of mirth re-echo loud,
And all their former joy recall. 180

But who is he, whose darken'd brow
Glooms in the midst of general mirth?
Before his eyes' far fiercer glow

The blue flames curdle o'er the hearth.

Dark is the robe which wraps his form, 185
 And tall his plume of gory red;
 His voice is like the rising storm,
 But light and trackless is his tread.

'T is noon of night, the pledge goes round,
 The bridegroom's health is deeply quaff'd; 190
 With shouts the vaulted roofs resound,
 And all combine to hail the draught.

Sudden the stranger-chief arose,
 And all the clamorous crowd are hush'd;
 And Angus' cheek with wonder glows, 195
 And Mora's tender bosom blush'd.

"Old man!" he cried, "this pledge is done;
 Thou saw'st 't was duly drank by me:
 It hail'd the nuptials of thy son:
 Now will I claim a pledge from thee. 200

"While all around is mirth and joy,
 To bless thy Allan's happy lot,
 Say, had'st thou ne'er another boy?
 Say, why should Oscar be forgot?"

"Alas!" the hapless sire replied, 205
 The big tear starting as he spoke,
 "When Oscar left my hall, or died,
 This aged heart was almost broke.

"Thrice has the earth revolved her course
 Since Oscar's form has bless'd my sight; 210
 And Allan is my last resource,
 Since martial Oscar's death or flight."

"T is well," replied the stranger stern,
 And fiercely flash'd his rolling eye:

“Thy Oscar’s fate I fain would learn; 215
Perhaps the hero did not die.

“Perchance, if those whom most he loved
Would call, thy Oscar might return;
Perchance the chief has only roved;
For him thy beltane yet may burn. 220

“Fill high the bowl the table round,
We will not claim the pledge by stealth;
With wine let every cup be crown’d;
Pledge me departed Oscar’s health.”

“With all my soul,” old Angus said, 225
And fill’d his goblet to the brim;
“Here’s to my boy! alive or dead,
I ne’er shall find a son like him.”

“Bravely, old man, this health has sped;
But why does Allan trembling stand? 230
Come, drink remembrance of the dead,
And raise thy cup with firmer hand.”

The crimson glow of Allan’s face
Was turn’d at once to ghastly hue;
The drops of death each other chase 235
Adown in agonizing dew.

Thrice did he raise the goblet high,
And thrice his lips refused to taste;
For thrice he caught the stranger’s eye
On his with deadly fury placed. 240

“And is it thus a brother hails
A brother’s fond remembrance here?
If thus affection’s strength prevails,
What might we not expect from fear?”

Roused by the sneer, he raised the bowl, 245

“Would Oscar now could share our mirth!”
Internal fear appall’d his soul;
He said, and dash’d the cup to earth.

“T is he! I hear my murderer’s voice!”
Loud shrieks a darkly gleaming form, 250
“A murderer’s voice!” the roof replies,
And deeply swells the bursting storm.

The tapers wink, the chieftains shrink,
The stranger’s gone, — amidst the crew
A form was seen in tartan green, 255
And tall the shade terrific grew.

His waist was bound with a broad belt round,
His plume of sable stream’d on high;
But his breast was bare, with the red wounds there,
And fix’d was the glare of his glassy eye. 260

And thrice he smiled, with his eye so wild,
On Angus bending low the knee;
And thrice he frown’d on a chief on the ground,
Whom shivering crowds with horror see.

The bolts loud roll, from pole to pole, 265
The thunders through the welkin ring,
And the gleaming form, through the mist of the storm,
Was borne on high by the whirlwind’s wing.

Cold was the feast, the revel ceased,
Who lies upon the stony floor? 270
Oblivion press’d old Angus’ breast,
At length his life-pulse throbs once more.

“Away, away! let the leech essay
To pour the light on Allan’s eyes:”
His sand is done, — his race is run; 275
Oh! never more shall Allan rise!

But Oscar's breast is cold as clay,
His locks are lifted by the gale:
And Allan's barbed arrow lay
With him in dark Glentinar's vale. 280

And whence the dreadful stranger came,
Or who, no mortal wight can tell;
But no one doubts the form of flame,
For Alva's sons knew Oscar well.

Ambition nerved young Allan's hand, 285
Exulting demons wing'd his dart;
While Envy waved her burning brand,
And pour'd her venom round his heart.

Swift is the shaft from Allan's bow;
Whose streaming life-blood stains his side? 290
Dark Oscar's sable crest is low,
The dart has drunk his vital tide.

And Mora's eye could Allan move,
She bade his wounded pride rebel;
Alas! that eyes which beam'd with love 295
Should urge the soul to deeds of hell.

Lo! seest thou not a lonely tomb
Which rises o'er a warrior dead?
It glimmers through the twilight gloom;
Oh! that is Allan's nuptial bed. 300

Far, distant far, the noble grave
Which held his clan's great ashes stood;
And o'er his corpse no banners wave,
For they were stain'd with kindred blood.

What minstrel gray, what hoary bard, 305
Shall Allan's deeds on harp-strings raise?
The song is glory's chief reward,
But who can strike a murderer's praise?

